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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000257

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ACTING A/S CARTER MEETS PM MELES

REF: ADDIS 3462

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Phil Carter highlighted to Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles over a two-hour January 30 meeting that while principal themes of our foreign policy are unlikely to change across U.S. Administrations, the U.S. will certainly emphasize the diplomacy and development elements of U.S. interests in bilateral engagements than we have in the recent past. While Carter confirmed that the U.S. sees security threats as real and persistent, our engagement will now shift to support a more long term sustainable approach to address threats by supporting a conducive political environment to address people's needs, and promote transparency, governance, tolerance, and pluralism. In that context, Carter stressed that bilateral engagement will highlight human rights, democracy, and governance issues much more. Surprisingly, Meles responded by acknowledging that "of course the U.S. will emphasize democracy and governance issues again; that is what the United States does." Having clearly been briefed from Carter's lunch with ruling party officials (septel), Meles responded rather rigidly to Carter's specific push for the release from prison of opposition leader Birtukan Midekssa and to concerns over the recently passed Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO Law). While welcoming the engagement, Meles concluded the meeting with two requests conveyed to other USG principals over the past year: the U.S. should continue to raise your concerns about these issues, but 1) judge Ethiopia against our own cultural and constitutional framework, and 2) do not judge or criticize Ethiopia more harshly than you do "others in the region" -- a clear reference to Eritrea. End Summary.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S VIEWS OF ETHIOPIA

12. (C) After consulting and seeking Meles's analysis of dynamics and approaches to Somalia and Sudan (septels) Carter highlighted that the United States' active consultations with Ethiopia on regional affairs is a testament to the breadth and depth of the U.S.-Ethiopia bilateral relationship and how much we value it. Carter noted that while broad foreign policy priorities are unlikely to shift significantly across U.S. Administrations, our tactics, approaches, and areas of emphasis will likely see changes. Carter noted that our engagement moving forward will certainly have a greater balance among the "three D's" with diplomacy and development playing much more prominent roles in dialogue to become more

in balance with engagement on defense. Carter emphasized that the U.S. values our relationship with Ethiopia and wants to strengthen and continue these relations because of our common interests of rendering Ethiopia, and the Horn of Africa, more stable, peaceful, and prosperous. Moving immediately to specifics, Carter stressed that recent Ethiopian actions -- including the passage of a restrictive CSO Law, challenges in governance and in the restrictive environment facing opposition political parties, the absence of open and public debate, rampant human rights abuses, and the late-December imprisonment of opposition leader Birtukan Midekssa -- are not only raising concerns in Congress, but "give us pause." Carter stressed that while these issues can be resolved and that the Administration does not want to see them dominate the bilateral agenda, the current trajectory is moving them to the front of our bilateral agenda and, until they are addressed, could affect how we engage the GoE on future issues.

UNEXPECTED RECEPTIVITY

¶3. (C) Clearly having been briefed on Carter's discussion with ruling party officials earlier in the day, Meles responded with unexpected receptivity. Meles noted that Ethiopia is comfortable with the United States' global approach, but was "never fully comfortable with the last Administrations over-emphasis on security." Instead, "a more balanced dialogue will be more helpful and is a good approach." In preemptively warning against an overly compensating response, Meles next expressed his hope that the

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USG will not make the mistake of overemphasizing democracy and governance issues or make those issues "an obstacle to the greater agenda." Such over compensation risks making things "more of a mess" or "exposing the United States to the double standards" its policy leaves bare. Therefore, "it is helpful for all of us to say that the U.S. pursues human rights, democracy, and governance; no one points to double standards." Meles noted that Ethiopia "expects" the U.S. to pursue these issues, and surprisingly, noted that "while the U.S. did raise such issues in the first years of the Bush Administration's first term, it clearly wasn't the case in the Bush Administration's second term."

U.S. POSITION ON IFI VOTES A SORE POINT

¶4. (C) Meles argued that among the "three D's," Defense has never been a problem in the bilateral relationship with the U.S., but the development relationship has been "challenging." While Meles was quick to clarify that relations with USAID have been, and continue to be, fine, Ethiopia is concerned about the position of the U.S. Executive Director (USED) at the World Bank. Meles briefly raised a case several years ago in which the USED was disinclined to support Ethiopia's inclusion in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief initiative. More recently, Meles claimed that the World Bank had reported to Ethiopia that the USED opposed a pending Protecting Basic Services (PBS) vote due to concerns over Ethiopia's macroeconomic policies, which caused the delay in the project. (Note: Although Meles acknowledged that the World Bank may have blamed the delay on the USED's alleged position, he may also have been confused about the details. A World Bank PBS vote was expected in late-2008, concerns raised by the Bank's own vice president for Africa has caused its delay in being voted on until Bank officers address those concerns; the vote is now expected in the spring. At the same time, the USED did abstain in a December 2008 African Development Bank (AfDB) PBS vote, as the USED did in previous World Bank PBS votes, but delivered a strong message of concern about the sustainability of the impacts of the project in light of challenges with the current macro-economic environment. See reftel for details on PBS and

Post's recommendations. End Note.)

15. (C) Meles argued that Ethiopia has now signed a letter of policy intent with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and "if the policies are good for reducing poverty, they should be good enough for the U.S. to support." Despite Carter's counter that such is not necessarily the case, Meles repeated that the U.S. should support projects proposed for support in the international financial institutions (IFIs) as long as the policy "delivers on poverty reduction." In a thinly veiled warning, Meles stated that he hoped "the U.S. can be pragmatic, or else it should let sleeping dogs lie." Meles concluded by claiming that the USG's concerns are not shared by others in the international community.

PUSH BACK ON SPECIFIC CONCERNS

16. (C) Carter confirmed that the Administration will aim to be pragmatic in its approach, but emphasized that the United States will not avoid tough issues. Carter stressed that issues such as the implementation of the CSO Law and the detention of Birtukan Midekssa are concerns that can be resolved and must be to allow engagement to move on to broader issues of mutual interest. Carter specifically expressed concern that despite six months of persistent concerns being raised by NGOs and donor partners -- led by the U.S. -- Ethiopia still chose not to address these issues in the law's design, but to placate partners with assurances that they will be factored into how the law is implemented. Similarly, Carter stressed that Birtukan's detention is a symbol of the shrinking political space more broadly.

17. (C) Meles disregarded Carter's points arguing that problems often arise when countries take positions without adequate information or that are out of step with their own principles. "Releasing Birtukan would be the most undemocratic thing I could do," Meles argued, as he obtained her pardon on false pretenses and she instigated her own pardon revocation to force the hand of the international community against the Ethiopian Government (GoE). This

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tactic was the same used by the opposition in sparking the post-election violence in 2005, Meles asserted. "If I release Birtukan, I would be violating and undermining the rule of law and it would be very damaging to Ethiopia's democracy and institutions." "Ethiopia is right on this in principle, and those asking for Birtukan's release are wrong." Regarding the CSO Law, Meles argued that the one critical provision of the law is that determination that advocacy on rights-based issues and political process is the sole province of Ethiopian citizens. Meles was emphatic that that was a matter of principle on which the GoE was unyielding and that any approach for the GoE to revise it would be a "dead end." Meles argued that "half of the diplomats in Addis Ababa think that are like Peace Corps, but so much of the foreign aid into this country distorts things and is unhelpful." Looking to the Ambassador, Meles concluded "my friend here will deny it, but we know what people are doing here."

ESTABLISHING THE TONE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

18. (C) Establishing the tone of the new Administration, Carter acknowledged the Prime Minister's arguments but emphasized that the United States Government disagrees with his analysis. Carter repeated that the USG views the CSO Law, the media law of July 2008, and pardon revocation of Birtukan Midekssa as indicators of the shrinking political space and opportunities for dialogue in Ethiopia. Carter stressed USG concerns about prospects for democratic progress and stability as Ethiopia approached national elections in 2010. He emphasized that the USG rejects the notion that foreign support to civil society groups addressing democratic

rights issues poses a threat to democratization. Carter rejected Meles's assertion that foreign funding to enable domestic advocacy is undemocratic and stressed that these concerns risk affecting our development program with Ethiopia.

19. (C) Meles confirmed hearing the message that Carter brought, and confirmed Ethiopia's eagerness to engage, consult with, and seek assistance from the United States, especially regarding institutional capacity building for improved governance. He then quickly lamented persistent U.S. criticism -- particularly from Congress -- about Ethiopia's record when neighboring Eritrea's record is significantly worse without drawing the ire, criticism, or legislative attention of Congress. In light of being such a close friend of the U.S., Meles argued, "we expect a level of understanding and not to be treated worse than others in the region." Meles further lamented the propensity of the international community to criticize without factoring the constitutional and cultural context of a particular country. Highlighting Ethiopia's assessment that the new U.S. Administration may be more receptive to democrats in Congress who are critical of Ethiopia, Meles was pleased to receive Carter's confirmation that the U.S. will measure Ethiopia in light of Ethiopia's own cultural and constitutional context.
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